

Toward a November explosion in the Gulf?

by Thierry Lalevée

According to many military observers, during the first two weeks of November it will be decided whether Iran launches a new military offensive against Iraq. Though this may ultimately prove incorrect, the rationale is that by the middle of next month, a bitter-cold winter will set in. There is a growing belief that Iran might just launch a large-scale offensive before that deadline.

Iran's failure to launch an offensive in July or September, as a follow-up to its March offensive, had raised hopes that because of its internal political fight and the low level of its military supplies, Iran would finally recognize that a diplomatic and political settlement was the only way out. During the summer, the regular exchanges of emissaries between Iran and the Gulf countries lent this more credibility. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Islamzadeh was seen in Riyadh and many others places. Although the Iranian parliament's speaker, Hashemi Rafsanjani, did not answer the Saudi invitation to Mecca during the pilgrimage, the disturbances created by Iranian pilgrims were easily contained; a proof that the terrorist schemes worked out by Hojastesalam Moussavi-Khoeinia had not gathered political support in Teheran. As one Gulf observer remarked in early October, "There are serious hopes that a diplomatic breakthrough may be in the making."

By October, these hopes were dashed. On Oct. 5, the Iraqi commander of the southern front, General al Hobbori, announced that Iran was "massing some 200,000 troops in the south for a new offensive." On Oct. 15, the offensive began, but took the Iraqis by surprise as it was launched not in the south, against well defended Basrah, surrounded by trenches, canals, and hundreds of thousands of troops, but in the mountainous central front around the city of Seif Saad. The Iraqis assumed the offensive was "only a diversion for a bigger move in the south." However, weeks of fighting have shown the Iranians have other aims.

It took only a few days for the Iranians to recapture positions held by the Iraqis inside Iranian territory, some since 1980. They were important positions, but not the kind which win wars. However, the psychological impact on the army of successfully driving the enemy out of national territory, after months of inactivity and growing resentment against the war, has been a factor not to underestimate, as even

Iranian military officers opposed to Khomeini pointed out. This was taken into account by the mullahs in Teheran. Another factor is Iraq's inability to deploy its modern aircraft in the mountainous region, while Iran could deploy its newly received Swiss-made C-57 Pilatus planes tested in previous weeks of mountain fighting in Kurdistan.

Though driving the Iraqis out of Iranian national territory is known to be the only goal for which the regular Iranian army is ready to fight, the army does not control Iran. This was underlined last July when one of the leading commanders, Colonel Shirazi, was kicked upstairs to a bureaucratic job with the joint chiefs of staff. In his stead was installed one Col. Zahir Nejad whose military record is non-existent. Nonetheless, on Oct. 20, Zahir Nejad, now head of the joint chiefs, was appointed to the Supreme Defense Council, the inner council of mullahs which has ruled over the last four years of war, and which decides on Iran's intelligence and terrorist deployments.

Moreover, Zahir Nejad received the appointment as the "personal representative of Iman Khomeini" within the council, a direct challenge to parliament speaker Hashemi Rafsanjani who has been Khomeini's personal representative within the council since its creation. On only Oct. 19, Rafsanjani had announced that the fighting with Iraq was "not the big offensive, because we are waiting for more military supplies and a better situation to deliver a political blow to Iraq." The declaration was not appreciated among the hardliners around President Khomeini and the newly created right-wing opposition group in the parliament around Ayatollah Azari-Ghomi. It was too clear an indication of Iran's weaknesses.

That Khomeini now has two personal representatives within the most important council underlines the factional situation. Rafsanjani is known to have favored a series of diplomatic contacts made during the summer in Europe with leading Khomeini opponents. One of them, former defense minister Madani in Paris, was even asked to come back to Teheran to serve as mediator for a political settlement of the war. The proposal had no backing from Khomeini and little chance of being realized.

More recent contacts with Khomeini opponents have also been made. Reports are that some mullahs, like Rafsanjani and Madhavi-Kani of the "Society of the Struggling Clergy," may be already preparing a post-Khomeini regime based on the first Islamic government of 1979, with personalities like Bazargan and Ibrahim Yazdi. In that context, the war with Iraq is primarily a political gambit, not a military issue.

Those advocating an end to the war are faced with the extremists within Iran whose political future is based on Khomeini and the war's continued existence, as well as the Iraqis themselves. Iraq's new attacks against naval convoys on Oct. 24—as Vice-President Tariq Aziz was returning from Moscow—indicate a commitment to winning the war, with Moscow's help! This would be a development as little favored by the Gulf countries as an Iranian victory, but it's a lucky thing for Iran's fanatics.